

Divine grammar is the cure

The soul and the harp/13 - We need new human metaphors to also speak of the issues of God

By Luigino Bruni



Published in the [Avvenire](#) 20/06/2020

«The Bible is not a book about God: it is a book about man. From the perspective of the Bible: who is man? He is a being placed in the midst of labour but with the dreams and designs of God. God's dream is not to be alone, but to have mankind as a companion in the ongoing drama of continuous creation»

Abraham Heschel, Who is man?

Looking at the work of the shepherds and the care practiced by hosts, we can learn to know God better. Psalm 23 brings us to the heart of biblical humanism.

«The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake» (Psalm 23,1-4). And so, we have arrived at the most beautiful prayer-metaphor of the Bible. The whole Bible is a metaphor, every prayer is a metaphor. Metaphors are not only rhetorical and narrative tools, they are also means of discovery, to be able to understand and say things that we could not understand and say without the revelation of that metaphor. This is a revelation as well: God also reveals himself to us by suggesting metaphors to poets, which people then sift through with the help of the sixth sense of their faith and traditions. Millions of people, through the millennia, have prayed and sung this psalm, which is one of the most beloved ones in the whole Bible, and which continues to be sung in all the monasteries and convents of the world, with both soul and harp. It was and is the last farewell to our loved ones, the prayer of those who are about to cross a "dark valley" and wish to do so with the same faith-hope-love of the psalmist.

The people of Israel learned about God by looking at the humble, tiring and difficult work of the shepherds. By observing these ancient protagonists of nomadic economies, they obtained a better understanding of the grammar of the Covenant, and they learned something more than the mere nature of their different God without added images and with an unpronounceable name. They did not look to the kings, the pharaohs, or the powerful men among the people; instead, they came to know God by looking at human work, observing the action of a worker down to the smallest detail, with the smell of sheep still clinging to him, dusty, illiterate, and with the non-refined language of the poor. From the non-words of a nomadic worker, the Bible learned the words it needed in order to speak to us about God, leaving us with some of the richest and most beloved images in all religious literature. Which remind us that we can learn who God is by looking at our fellow men and women because, together with the "starry sky and the moral law", it is the concrete life of human beings that reveals the divine grammar, that biblical theology is hiding in anthropology. Therefore, every time that we find ourselves empty of words to pray, we can also look at the people working, and learn through them. Shepherds, workers, artisans, teachers, entrepreneurs - who knows how that ancient poet would have written his psalm in a post-industrial society like ours?

One day a poet realized that there was an analogy between the profession of the shepherd and their God. Hence, the metaphor of the shepherd became the image of God who is absent by his own explicit

command. Those people understood that they had to look at the shepherds to fully understand the logic of their God, and that he therefore would always guide them "on the right path", and that he would do so "for his name's sake", that is by virtue of his nature, because if the shepherds do it, then God *must do so too*. Psalm 23 is above all a declaration of faith, a song of love to that God whom the psalmist experienced as providence and a good Father, even in the darkest of nights: «Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me» (Psalm 23,4). Walking through a valley during the night was not just a hypothetical possibility; it was a condition from which prayer could arise. The psalms are also a cure for our deepest fears, the fear of death. We pray and recite them all through life partly to have different and better words when the great fears knock on our door. Our prayer will then go and open the door and maybe it will not find anyone there (or it will find someone, a friend, who will greet us with a kiss of peace). It is a great gift to be able to sing within our soul, while an anaesthesiologist is placing his wise hands on us: *Even though I walk through the darkest valley...* Being able to do it because we have been doing it for a lifetime. Prayer is also a kind of insurance: we pay a price every year to get the prize on the day of that "accident". We also pray our whole lives to earn our last amen.

We do not know if that psalm was written in Babylon, but the image of YHWH as shepherd was certainly further strengthened and developed during the exile. An exiled people, humiliated and without a temple, managed to see the green oasis along the rivers of Babylon, was able to live that desert as a refreshing pasture, managed to detect salvation in the midst of that misfortune, was able to see a shepherd-God in a beaten God. The transformation of the camps of Babylon into green meadows with fresh waters was possible thanks to the talents of that ancient poet, but the alchemy was also possible because there were prophets among the exiles as well. Prophecy is the active principle that transforms deserts into oases, imprisonments into liberations, and the tormentor's stick into the staff of a good shepherd. Two prophets who found themselves in exile in Babylon, Second Isaiah and Ezekiel, gave us the sharpest prophetic images there are of the good shepherd, going as far as the Gospels, crossing them and fertilizing them: «I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak. I will shepherd the flock with justice» (Ezekiel 34,11-16). The single most suggestive icon of the "good shepherd", which has influenced so much art and popular piety, belongs to the exiled anonymous prophet, known only as Second (Deuter) Isaiah: «He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young» (Isaiah 40,11). Without the exiled prophets, those people would have stopped singing: «By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps» (Psalm 137,1-2). The harps did not hang there forever, the soul of the poets did not stop singing, because, thanks to those great prophets, the exiled people were able to experience the shepherd-God again; they felt that that night was really a crossing on a path to salvation, another night of wading from which they would emerge wounded but blessed. No night can kill the soul if a prophet reveals its true meaning (or direction). In our nights of darkness, the voice of the prophets may reach us through a friend or through the verse from a poet or through a good word from our mother - all winds blow freely on earth and in the soul.

The second part of the Psalm surprises us with a different image: «You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows» (Psalm 23,5). Generation after generation of scholars have wondered what the link is between the first part of the Psalm (1-4), built on the image of the shepherd, and the second one that describes a scene of nomadic hospitality, so much so that some have hypothesized two originally autonomous psalms that were subsequently merged into one. It is perfectly possible to read them as a unity. A man, who is a nomad and a pilgrim, arrives near a foreign camp, thirsty and tired, perhaps hunted by some kind of enemy. And here, he ends up having this amazing experience of hospitality: he is not rejected by those different people, he is honoured. They set a canteen for him, they pour him a drink, his head and body are anointed with oils, and perfumes spread throughout filling the tent. His enemies do not dare to enter; they see that the man has found protection. At the end of the feast, the host offers the fugitive an escort to accompany him safely on the rest of the journey. Scenes that were not so rare back in the day, but are much rarer today.

In the ancient world, hospitality was something so vital that it was considered a sacred act in many cultures. In the Bible, God is the *liberator* from the slavery of Egypt, but he also acts as host for his freed people. Just like that nomadic and often fugitive people understood something important of God looking at the profession of good shepherds, that same psalmist, or perhaps a different one, learned something else of the same YHWH by living the experience of welcoming others, or by observing it

being practiced by others. He would have guessed that their God was both a shepherd and a host. We come to know and recognize God when we see how the shepherd treats his sheep, and we discover God himself when we see men welcoming and honouring other men and women. The two metaphors meet, enrich and complement each other. They also enrich God, because every time that he observes from the altitude of his heaven a shepherd taking care of his flock or a host honouring another human being, he learns something new. God, almighty and omniscient, knows what gentleness is and he knows what hospitality is, but in order to know meekness he needs the hand of the shepherd stroking the back of the lamb (meekly). And in order to know hospitality, he needs the infinite joy experienced by a pilgrim when a chalice is offered to him by a host under his tent. This is why he needed Adam to come out of Eden and become a shepherd and a host. The story is true for us, and it is true for God.

Hence, that ancient psalmist understood that the action of the shepherd and that of the host were really very much alike, that something important of God was being manifested in both the profession of the shepherd and of the host. YHWH is both a good shepherd and a good host, so in order to understand the grammar of caring, ours and God's, it is not enough to look at the relationship between a man and his animals (not back then and not today), we also need the art of hospitality, to look at how humans treat each other. When will we restore new human metaphors to say new and good things about God today? What if we are already doing it? New psalmists, with different languages, are perhaps already understanding God better and more deeply by looking at the work of doctors and nurses, seeing them arrive from distant countries to treat our patients, and hosting them in new kinds of tents. Perhaps other new people are in the process of understanding something new about men and God alike as they experience this hospitality. We do not know, we do not care to know, and we do not understand them because they are written in new languages; but if we were somehow able to intercept them, we would also hear the same words of the Psalm today, every day and all over the earth: «Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever» (Psalm 23,6).